



Growing organizational change: Applying a biomimicry lens to community-based food system study in a large undergraduate class

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Summary

We present the case study of a Land, Food, and Community II course with an enrollment of approximately 200 students per class. This case of organizational change within a large, required undergraduate class explores the integration and uptake of CBEL (community-based experiential learning) over four years with 800 students and 60 community partners from 18 regions of urban, suburban, and rural British Columbia, Canada at the University of British Columbia.

The multidisciplinary theme of food systems provides rich and diverse terrain to explore sustainability issues within food production, processing, distribution, access, consumption, and waste management, as well as food education, policy, and programs. Through action research (Stringer, 2007) over multiple years, the course and embedded food system project have moved through the stages of community inquiry to community engagement and arguably, community engaged scholarship (see Rojas, Sipos, & Valley, 2012).

We discuss this case as a microcosm of broader investigations into growing community-university collaborations in large classes by using a biomimetic metaphor based on systems and complexity approaches. Biomimicry refers to innovation and design inspired by nature (Benyus, 1997). Specifically, we share the change processes that have moved the Land, Food, and Community II class from community inquiry to community engagement, by incorporating community-based research and community service-learning. Findings from student feedback and community partner interviews help to shed light on strategies that have been most successful, as well as strategies still in development to contribute the sustainability of the community food system project. We document support for community-university collaboration at the faculty and institutional levels, as well as factors that affect the strength of community partnerships, potential of the student projects, and ongoing attempts to integrate across 30 diverse projects per year.

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